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C O N F I D E N T I A L RIYADH 009435

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DHAHRAN SENDS
PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/21/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [SA](#)

SUBJECT: SAUDI DISSIDENT TURKI AL-HAMAD SHARES PRIORITIES
FOR REFORM

Classified by Consul General John Kincannon for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

1. (C) In a meeting with CG and PolOff December 19 over coffee at the Gulf Meridian Hotel in Khobar, Saudi dissident and writer Turki Al-Hamad discussed his three priorities for reform: "We need reform of the judicial system, public freedoms, and public rights." He argued that political reform had to be built on true freedom of expression, saying "if people can express themselves and feel safe, we can move on to other reforms." Like almost all of our interlocutors, he spoke respectfully of King Abdullah but implicitly questioned his ability to push a reform agenda. "The will is there," he said, leaving it at that with a shrug of the shoulders. Al-Hamad expressed skepticism that the newly formed municipal councils will play an important governance role but noted that the elections "were a new entry to the Saudi political scene."

2. (C) Al-Hamad also offered his views on various bastions of extremism or authoritarianism in the region. In response to a question from the CG, he described the "awakening sheikhs," for example 'Eid and Ayad al-Gurni, Safar al-Hawali, and Salman al-Awdah, as "playing politics and recasting themselves as Islamic liberals." He said that they had lost credibility with many people because they had changed tack too many times in response to pressure and inducements from the SAG. "But they haven't changed deep down," he continued. "They cannot be trusted." Asked by PolOff how Saudis viewed Iran, he said there were mixed feelings. "We are always proud when an Islamic nation develops the bomb," he said. "But with Iran we also worry that it will bring instability to the region, and we worry about the Iran's connections with the Shi'a here." He opined that, in the current environment, it was increasingly difficult for totalitarian regimes like Syria's to survive.

3. (C) Comment: Al-Hamad showed no hesitation in meeting with us. He talked frankly, if quietly and frequently in sweeping generalities. He enjoys the artistic practice of answering questions with questions or responding with a short epigram that his interlocutor must decipher for himself. Al-Hamad said he welcomed further meetings. Although his books are banned in Saudi Arabia, he did not seem constrained in expressing his opinion in an informal setting. Previous ConOffs had speculated to us that SAG pressure had forced Al-Hamad to circumscribe his appearances on pan-Arab TV channels and reduce contacts with foreigners, but Al-Hamad said he felt no such constraints. The recent death of his wife and his focus on a new novel, rather than SAG pressure, may be alternate explanations as to why he has been less visible of late. End comment.

(APPROVED: KINCANNON)
GFOELLER